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Chaos vs. Thelema?

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Inspired, no doubt foolishly, by a new moon and the Cramps` "Psychedelic Jungle", I have decided to enter the Thelema vs. Chaos debate. This is of course an impossible task, which is no doubt why it appeals to me.

Firstly, what is it that distinguishes Thelma from Chaos? In Starfire, Mick Staley attempts to distinguish Thelema from Crowleyanity. Thelema he suggested pre-existed Crowley`s formulation of it. This immediately causes problems, since for the majority of magicians, Crowley = Thelema. But if it can be accepted that there is a something which exists independently of Crowley`s writings, then it must be this something (Thelema) which is to be contrasted with Chaos Magick. The core of this something, I suggest, is the Will. Is this idea of the Will in any way opposed to Chaos?

What is Chaos then?

For the purposes of this argument I will interpret Chaos as follows: that the familiar world of everyday experience has its roots in Chaos. So that any attempt to understand the world via reason reaches a boundary, on the other side of which lies Chaos, a state of existence/non-existence which cannot be understood by the rational ego. However, through the techniques of ritual, that state can be manifest in the everyday world, suspending the accepted "laws" of common sense and allowing magick to occur. Furthermore, perhaps as a result of the practice Chaos magick, the idea of Chaos is slowly entering the popular imagination via science. This refutes classical science, which is based on the belief that if the structure of the physical world could be sufficiently precisely modeled in a mathematical form, it would be possible to predict the future state of various systems (weather, for example) which make up the physical world.

However, it is now grudgingly admitted that this would require a precision of measurement which it is impossible to achieve. Engineers have long since had to accept this uncertainty - that all measurement is limited by the accuracy of the measuring device. Absolute precision is an impossible goal. There is always a degree of uncertainty, an instability, and by focusing the Will upon this either/or region, the magician can exert an influence upon the world at this level, which when it occurs, can produce the Willed outcome.

To the extent that Chaos is a form of magick, i.e. it seeks to exert an influence upon the world of everyday consciousness, it must involve the Will. Otherwise it would be closer to a form of mysticism, that is the attempt to "go with the flow" of the experienced world without seeking to influence the direction of that flow. In this form, Chaos is closer to a "higher form of order", that is that the apparent random or chance events of one's experience of existence are in fact the result of some greater existence than that of the individual. And that by disengaging the desires of the ego-self, one can experience this greater existence, interpreting the obstacles and blows of everyday existence as a stimulus to the development of a "Stoic" consciousness, which will enable the self to eventually swim freely as a fish in the river of the Tao, or Chaos.

The idea which this is based on tends to be that of the hermit, the forest sage of Hinduism, the solitary adept of High Magick. No doubt if it was possible in this present age, one could experience such an existence if one could remove the self from the rest of human existence. But such a model is no longer valid, since the growth of human consciousness is such that there is no virgin wilderness left in which to undertake such a quest. We are forced to contend with the results of the human desire for knowledge, power, control and security.

This is perhaps the crucial difference between Chaos magick and Thelema. Thelema, as developed by Crowley into a form suitable for the 20th century, contains a whole heritage of experience and practice which reaches back through the Golden Dawn through hermeticism to Egypt and Sumeria, which in turn drew on the beliefs of our nameless ancestors who struggled to create models of the world, cosmologies and creation myths within which to make sense of their being in the world.

Crowley`s task, as had been of Mathers and Eliphas Levi before him, was to synthesize this vast body of conscious/unconscious knowledge and represent it in a way understandable by at least a few of his contemporaries. Partly it is a question of language. Unfortunately the language of magick was limited by the dominance of Judeo-Christianity on the one hand and Reason on the other. Our everyday language derives from our perception of a world made up of distinguishable objects, and on the faculty of sight primarily. But as soon as we move into the more subjective sphere of magick, problems arise. To what extent do we share the same magickal reality and use words such as "the Will" in the same way? The problem is not confined to magick. For a time I worked in quality control at London Rubber. Periodically I had to compare my work with others to make sure we were all applying the same so that I was not rejecting condoms that another person was passing. In science the theory is that one person's work is critically examined by their peer group. The difficulty is that as soon as creativity enters the picture, it will tend to disrupt this process. The test of any form of magick should be "does it work?". But how can that be judged, since the results of a ritual may not become apparent for some time. In the early eighties, much work was done to halt the expansion of nuclear weaponry. But it is only now, as profound changes occur in Eastern Europe, that this can be judged a success. And the changes may yet be lost by a failure of imagination and the difficulty of challenging the parasitic military-industrial complexes of both East and West.

Thelema may be saddled with the archaic terminology inherited via Crowley from the Golden Dawn, but at its heart lies a crucial bullshit detector. I have found that the question "what is your Will?" directed at any group or individual who claims to be desiring change is a very effective challenge. What is unsettling, however, is the discovery that in most cases it evokes only silence, or at best a string of evasions.

This I feel is the most damaging criticism of Thelema, that it has failed to cross over from magick into the diverse pool of "alternative" beliefs which seek to reshape society. This is hardly a question of mere academic interest, as Green issues emerge and look set to dominate the next decade, the "spiritual", that is neo-pagan, belief structures which infest Green consciousness are also going to exert a growing influence. We may yet discover that the future, as the Dead Kennedy predicted, will be "California Über Alles".

Can Chaos magick then succeed where Thelema has not (yet)? I doubt it, since the reaction to both by the average alternative type (let alone Joe Normal) is that it is "too dark". The very word "Chaos" tends to get tagged with "anarchy" and evoke nightmare visions of mad-axemen running wild in the street. Of course, for some this may be its very appeal, anything so bad must be good...

No, somehow we have to achieve the Sysphean task of applying the notion of Will like Occam`s razor to the fast multiplying dualistic entities of New Age (un)awareness. In practical terms I understand this to mean directing our Wills at and with the growing Green movement, so that rather than disappearing into a fog of "good intentions", it becomes a real and willed critique of consumer culture. Just as Marxism failed to achieve its desires, since the working class had already been "mobilized" by the capitalists, so magick fails since the energies of the mass unconscious have already been tapped by advertising, via the mass media.

The energy tending towards change of consciousness (evolution) has been subverted by consumer culture into the desire to possess an unending stream of glass beads and cheap cottons, or in our case, microwave ovens and mink belly-button brushes. The whole thrust of advertising is to bypass our logic circuits and touch directly our desire for status and security. We don't just buy the product, we buy the dream, maya the illusion of success. It is, however much we may protest, a form of magick. I may be an impoverished squatter in a third world shanty town, but if I can buy a bottle of Coke, I believe I possess the whole dream of the richest American millionaire. I may be a Trabant owning East German, but by crossing the (former) abyss of the Wall I become a potential Porsche possessor.

But if you look at those already possess such dreams, what do you find? That it is, as in California, these same people who turn to the most ridiculous New Age bullshit in order to satisfy their craving for something more, for something to fill up the endless aching void they feel scratching and gnawing like some Charles Manson nightmare outside the walls of their Beverly Hills mansions.

But of course, the last thing they want to hear is "the truth". Better to create a multi-billion dollar New Age industry than accept that within the richest mansions lies the reality of Chaos, of that Void which spins around itself the veils of maya, the dance of illusion, in which one is equally a starving beggar and a voluptuous movie star. "What is your Will?".

Of course I am somewhat prejudiced for all I used to sing along with Bowie on Ziggy Stardust (I could make it all worthwhile as a rock n roll star) I chose magick as a path. Through experiences both beautiful and terrifying I have come to understand the human condition as but one aspect of a continuum of consciousness. For me, the whole universe is a living entity which I interact with in the fleeting streams of energies which inspire my awareness. Both rationally and poetically I perceive my brain, my body as part of the very substance of the universe and not distinguishable from it (i.e. NUIT). For me, the human condition is part tragedy, part farce. We are semi-intelligent apes who have been driven by fleeting glimpses of what might be, to create this world, our reality. But in our ignorance, we mistake the glimpse for the whole, the ego for the self. We strive for "order" and create a chaos, and then recognize in chaos a "higher form of order".

"Knowledge is power, power is control, control is security". Oh yeah? But knowledge is also pleasure, a pleasure more intense than any created by security. Security is sterility, sterility is death. We pay lip service to evolution, but cannot accept that evolution implies change, and change denies security. What do we will?

If our will is security, stability, then that we shall have, as so many fossils. To embrace Chaos (Thelema) is to renounce such false gods and accept that our actions as magicians will change not only ourselves, but our world. Insofar as both Chaos and Thelema are valid paths, thus far will they change us. To cling to an identity, however pleasing or fulfilling, is a denial of magick. Magick is about change, the only constant factor in the unfolding of the implicate order/chaos of the universe.

Along with Thelema and Chaos, I also practice the magick of Maat. To the Egyptians Maat was the "right order of the universe". The contrast is between the familiar Hindu concept of "karma", which deals with our human existence and the less familiar concept of "rta" which deals with our aspects as forms of (universal) consciousness.

Magick diverged from science some 300 years ago. Science sought to discover "the hand of god" in the natural world; magick sought to become the equal of the gods. Now we witness the overlapping of these paths. We are no longer the creations of some distant god, but the natural products of the universe. We have "evolved" out of a handful of organic chemicals. Now we have the ability, through the replication of DNA to evolve ourselves. We have,

literally, the powers of a god. What we lack, and what magick must seek to provide, is the intelligence to use (or refuse) such power. The way to achieve this is to ask the question: "what is our will?" Are our genes our motivating force, or is there something else which I call "consciousness"? This consciousness I hold to be implicit in the structure of the universe, and has been revealed as such by quantum physics, however difficult such a realization may be for us. It may be unprovable/undeniable, and therefore unscientific, but I suggest that our so-called consciousness is a quantum phenomena.

This is what Crowley experienced as the interplay of Nuit and Hadit in the Book of the Law. It is also the root of Chaos. So that Thelema and Chaos are but different aspects of a single (multiple) experience, expressed in languages appropriate to their different times and ambiances.

Alone I cannot fully express the complexity of these possibilities, and yet we must each try to do so. Only by placing them at the heart of our experience of being in the world, can we hope to create a society which will survive rather than perish under its unconscious contradictions. As yet we are but "naked apes", but we are apes with sufficiently complex brains to at least glimpse the possibility of being more than we are and become "homo veritas", that is truly human at last.

As we are, we cannot fully know this to be true, only with our imagination can we glimpse the potential implied. It is my Will to bring this about, this is why I write these words, that they have touch and stimulate whoever may read them. So mote it be.

On rereading the above, I feel the need to expand the argument somewhat. Having bashed my way through an anthropological essay on nationality and the state, it struck me that recent events in Eastern Europe have many consequences. The whole point of the "iron curtain", was to allow East to develop its alternative economic system, as spelt out by Marx. What is happening now is the incorporation of that economic system into a global economy, which implies the failure of Marxism. This failure leaves a power vacuum. The majority of critiques of the Western power structure have come from Marxism. But if it is now seen to have failed, the possibility exists for a more powerful critique to arise.

Where will we find this critique - in magick. Of course this requires magicians to adopt a more rigorous intellectual approach to their beliefs, but surely that is what Chaos/Thelema argument is about, with each side arguing that the other is deceiving itself as regards the "true" form of magick. What I am suggesting is that magicians start to take magic seriously as "energy directed (willed) towards change". Rather than as an escapist belief system parasitic upon the economic success of capitalism. To practice magick we must surely believe that we inhabit a magical, rather than a strictly economic universe. How much more effective would our magick be then if we could replace the belief system of economic society with that of a society rooted in a magickal conception of reality.

Such is the apple with which I tempt you - do you dare taste the forbidden fruit ?

Alistair Livingston:

I do know him personally and am glad to meet him again in summer. A. Livingstone is a pseudonym of Ramsey Dukes (which is a pseudonym too :-)). He is member of the OTO and made a lot of Chaos working & theory. He wrote some very genuine books about magic (Liber SGDSMEE, Thunderqueak), is now concerned with KI (Words Made Flesh). You can contact him via: T.M.T.S., Wharf Mill, Winchester, Hants, SO23 9NJ, England With fractalic greetings and laughter * Fra.: Apfelmann *

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